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RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 3671

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: USCIRF IN HCMC: MEETING THE HOA HAO

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The meeting between members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and a group of Hoa Hao followers revealed the group's deep suspicions of the GVN and its policies on religion -- suspicions that have been fueled by the appointment of an official, GVN-sanctioned Hoa Hao Executive Council. Hoa Hao members at this meeting alternately denied that an imprisoned member encouraged others to commit suicide by self-immolation and asserted that self-immolation was a traditional form of Buddhist protest; they denied that an imprisoned member deliberately threw gasoline on a GVN official. The Hoa Hao members complained that religious freedom is moving too slowly in Vietnam and that properties confiscated after 1975 are not being returned. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Commissioners Cromartie, Bansal, Argue, Gaer, Eid and Leo met with Hoa Hao Elder Tran Huu Duyen and Hoa Hao members Truong Van Thuc, Nguyen Van Lia and Vo Van Diem (younger brother of imprisoned Hoa hao follower Vo Van Thanh Liem) on October 26, 2007. The Hoa Hao members presented a negative view of situation for the unrecognized Hoa Hao sect to which they belong and condemned the GVN-recognized Hoa Hao Executive Council. They listed several cases of persecution by GVN and commented that religious freedom improvement in Vietnam is too slow. They also seek international pressure on the GVN to release fourteen jailed Hoa Hao followers, whom they believe to have been unjustly incarcerated.

3. (SBU) The Hoa Hao followers spoke of decades of persecution and confiscation of properties since 1975 by the GVN. They accused GVN of carrying out unlawful arrests and detentions using violence and carrying out discriminatory measures against the Hoa Hao true believers. Both Nguyen Van Lia and Truong Van Thuc blasted religious freedom progress in Vietnam as "too slow," adding that true Hoa Hao believers do not view the GVN-sanctioned Hoa Hao Executive Council as the democratically elected representative of Hoa Hao Buddhism as a whole. Lia, Diem and Thuc said that the GVN put its own people into the Executive Council, severely compromising its independence. Nguyen Van Lia handed the commissioners a postcard photo of a building that used to be the Hoa Hao's library in An Giang province. This building, according to Lia, was confiscated in 1975 and turned into a bank, which was eventually torn down without a court order during a redevelopment project in 2007. Lia said that while many Hoa Hao followers felt frustrated and tried to protest, the GVN-sanctioned Hoa Hao Executive Council remained passive in the face of this GVN decision.

4. (SBU) The three Hoa Hao believers specifically raised the case of Vo Van Thanh Liem, who was imprisoned for "attempted assault" during an incident in 2005. According to Liem's brother Vo Van Diem, Liem is a peaceful man who "never killed an ant"

and devoted his life to the development of religious works. Diem said that during the incident in 2005, Liem was pouring gasoline over himself when police tried to stop him and several others from reconstructing his home-temple gate. They went on to state that some of the gasoline "splashed" on a nearby GVN official, who suffered no injury. (Note: The GVN strongly contests this version of events and maintains that Liem deliberately threw gasoline on an official who was attempting to stop suicide attempts. In September 2005, Liem was sentenced to 7 years of imprisonment for attempting to injure others. In the same incident that led to Liem's arrest, two other Hoa Hao followers doused themselves with gasoline and set themselves alight; one died of his burns. End note.) Diem referred to the incident as a "set-up" by GVN to provoke the Hoa Hao believers into extreme actions, noting that the electricity and water supply for the home-temple had been cut off a few days earlier.

15. (SBU) Commissioners asked the Hoa Hao members' view on Le Quang Liem-another leader of one of the Hoa Hao groups-to confirm whether he encouraged his own followers to self-immolate as accused by the GVN. The Hoa Hao members said that although Le Quang Liem started out with peaceful protest, he was soon forced into using self-immolation as a means of protest after severe persecution by GVN. While they did not agree that Liem encouraged followers to burn themselves, they did state that self-immolation has been a traditional way of protest for Buddhists. Commissioner Gaer asked the Hoa Hao members that there was an official law in Vietnam that bans self-immolation; they replied that there is not. (Note: Suicide is illegal in Vietnam, as in most countries. End Note.)

16. (SBU) In response to questions from USCIRF concerning incidents of reported persecution, the Hoa Hao members cited several the following cases: 6 Hoa Hao monks sentenced to jail terms for peaceful demonstration (May 2006); two Hoa Hao members attempted self-immolation (Note: one died; one was seriously injured and later imprisoned in August 2006. There appears to be come confusion between this case and one in August 2005. End

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note); four Hoa Hao members arrested after a hunger strike (May 2007); and a beating at the death anniversary of a self-immolated follower (August 2007). The Hoa Hao members handed appeal letters from the families of 14 Hoa Hao prisoners to the CIRF Commissioners and called for pressure on GVN to release them.

17. (SBU) While Lia, Diem and Thuc actively participated in exchanges with the CIRF Commissioners, Elder Tran Huu Duyen was largely silent and showed no opinion at the meeting. Lia, Diem, and Thuc also reported that police came to see them before they traveled from An Giang province to HCMC for the meeting. Policemen also sat in the hotel lobby during the meeting and followed the Hoa Hao members afterwards. At the end of the meeting, some of the commissioners gave the Hoa Hao members some money to cover their travel costs.

Comment

18. (SBU) With several members of this particular Hoa Hao sect in jail and in light of the ongoing dispute over confiscated properties, the group's distrust of the GVN is understandable. At the same time, the specific incidents of GVN persecution cited by the Hoa Hao members generally appear to be linked to attempts by the GVN to prevent Hoa Hao members from committing suicide by self-immolation. End comment.

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